



GIL CISNEROS

Representing **CALIFORNIA'S 39th** District

*Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee
June 23, 2020*

Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Granger, and Members of the House Appropriations Committee, thank you for providing this opportunity to advocate on behalf of the people in California's 39th Congressional District. My district is one of many across this country that are facing new challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have testified before this Committee on several occasions both for the previous and current Fiscal Year (FY) to highlight the importance of various programs to my district, from VA homelessness programs to Community Development Financial Institutions. I also submitted a number of programmatic requests to this Committee to ensure appropriate funding levels for programs such as those under the Army Corps' Civil Works budget - to support the Prado Dam in my district - and the Department of Transportation - to support highway projects like the 57/60 confluence project. Additionally, I have been a tireless advocate of providing direct federal funding to support states and cities in future supplemental appropriations packages because of how declining tax revenue due to the economic consequences of COVID-19 are impacting local governments. I am already hearing from local communities who fear this may lead to cuts for critical public safety services, such as funding for our firefighters or funding for the successful North Orange County Public Safety Task Force, which has been an excellent example of how law enforcement and community-based groups can work together to address homelessness and youth violence. I want to take this opportunity to highlight a few more programs as you allocate funding levels for the upcoming fiscal year.

SUPPORT OUR SMALL BUSINESSES

First, I urge you to provide a minimum of \$150 million for Small Business Development Centers (SBDC). Since 2003, my constituents have greatly benefitted from the free and low-cost assistance to small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs provided by the SBDC at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). I cannot thank the counselors at the CSUF SBDC enough for their dedicated work these past few months helping our small businesses navigate the various programs Congress authorized under the CARES Act. Support for SBDCs are widespread and bipartisan, as evidenced by the letter I led with Reps. Larsen, Young, and Balderson to this Committee earlier this year. I hope you will heed our request and provide strong funding levels for SBDCs to continue to serve our communities.

AID FOR SCHOOLS

Second, I urge you to support strong funding levels for education programs that serve minority and disadvantaged populations. Education gaps have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the new realities of distance learning. We must do all that we can to support our students most at risk of being left behind.

For our K-12 schools, I urge strong funding levels for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) programs to help educators continue to effectively serve students with disabilities. Since schools closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, I have heard from countless school districts and parents about the challenges of providing quality education to students, and these challenges are tenfold for our students with disabilities who need unique supports and services. As the country transitions back to a modified learning environment, school districts will need resources to work together with families to determine how to best serve these students. IDEA programs have been chronically underfunded for years with Congress not once providing the 40 percent of average per pupil expenditures required under the 1975 law. We must ensure our schools are able to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities.

I also urge strong funding levels for English Language Acquisition grants. English language learners are the fastest growing student population group, and I was disappointed to see that the President had proposed an elimination of the English Language Acquisition program in his FY 2021 Budget Request. That is why I joined Rep. Andy Kim in leading a letter to this committee urging \$980.4 million for English Language Acquisition grants, the same level passed by the House in FY 2020. We must do all that we can to provide appropriate resources to ensure that educational outcomes for English learners are in step with all student groups and that they exit the K-12 system ready to succeed in college and their careers.

When it comes to funding for higher education, I urge you to provide strong funding levels to support Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) such as CSUF in my district. HSIs play a critical role in addressing the education gap that disadvantages Hispanic students, enrolling 66 percent of the 3.6 million college students nationwide. Yet time and again, HSIs continue to be underfunded, receiving only 68 cents for every dollar going to all colleges and universities, per student, across all federal funding sources. According to an analysis by Excelencia in Education, the CARES Act only reinforced this funding inequity because the formula used to allocate funding for institutions of higher learning was based on full-time equivalent enrollment of Pell Grant recipients. This left students enrolled part-time with less funds, when part-time students are more likely to face larger economic hardships as a result of the pandemic due to loss of work. In FY 2020, this Committee approved the highest levels ever provided to HSIs and I was frustrated to see these funding levels cut after conferencing with the Senate. I joined Chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Castro in a letter to this Committee earlier this year urging \$65 million for HSI programs under the Department of Agriculture, \$55 million for HSI programs under the National Science Foundation, and \$205 million for HSI programs under the Department of Education. I urge you to hold firm on strong funding levels in FY 2021.

Further, I urge robust funding for the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence program, which provides competitive grants to Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) that have been instrumental in educating our nation's racially and ethnically diverse teachers. As outlined in a letter to you led by myself and Reps. Gallego, Hayes, and Houlahan, there are clear benefits to having a teaching workforce that reflects our nation's population. The Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence Grant program can be used to enhance educator preparation and provide financial aid to prospective teachers to help eliminate a key barrier to a diverse educator workforce. Investing in this grant program is key to producing a diverse teaching workforce that better reflects our nation's student population.

HOUSING

Third, I urge you to support critical housing programs that help people stay in their homes and prevent homelessness. I led a letter to this Committee earlier this year in support of an increase in funding for Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG), which have been effective in both preventing and addressing homelessness in my district. In the age of COVID-19, this funding has proven even more invaluable at providing emergency assistance to those at risk of homelessness. Cities in my district have relied on ESG funding to ensure existing shelters are safe to accommodate increased demand, rent local motel rooms to quarantine homeless populations most at risk of infection, and rapidly re-house families. I also urge strong funding levels for programs at HUD that help keep Americans in their homes as they face economic uncertainty. This includes HUD's housing counseling programs as well as the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Finally, I urge your support of our public health agencies, which have been under immense strain and pressure. In my district, our public health professionals have risen to the challenge of educating the public on best practices to keep their families safe, on occasion facing resistance and even death threats for making sound scientific recommendations. We owe it to them to provide sufficient resources to allow them to continue to respond to the current pandemic while protecting public health from future threats. This includes strong funding levels for programs at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ASTDR), and Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) programs.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these requests. I appreciate the challenges facing this Committee to support our communities during this unique time in American history.